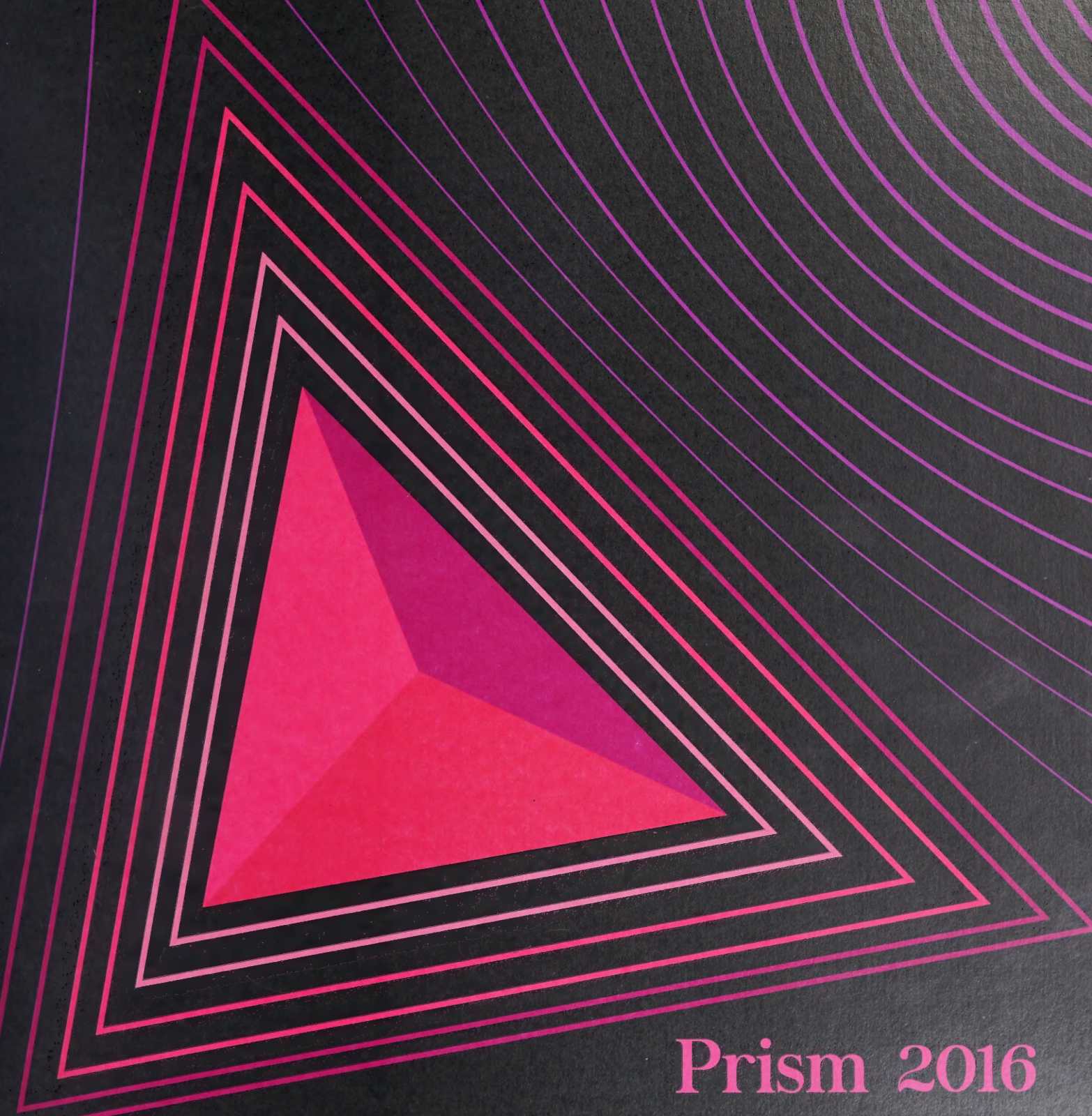
Prism 2016

Prism

William Peace University
Literary Magazine 2016

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Fresh Start
Allie Fitzsimmons

I sigh with heartache
While the emotional pain awakes
With tears rolling down my face
I'm slowly losing fate
Trying to find my spirituality
Without taking casualties
While I take a refuge in a ritual.
This age old question is critical

Do I wither due to my own demise?
Because there isn't any compromise
With this battle between good and evil.
My love will never equal
To a proper sequel
In this passionate game of depression
That always leaves an impression
On my broken heart
But just maybe this could be a fresh start?

Essential
Emily Banegas

Rose Water
Insists that I lie
In its warm, tender coverings.
I submit,
and Rose Water cradles me into existence.

The Path
Allie Fitzsimmons

We're always in denial
About a decision that is final
Our choices have left destruction
But we were not given any instruction
Where do we go from here?
Do we take the path of familiarity or fear?
May a moment of clarity define us?
Allow the storm to clear
And trust what is near

Messages

Rebekah Meekins

Birthday cards, teddy bears, and "helicopter head"
That time you playfully grabbed my foot and gave me a nightmare in bed
I still can't believe that you're gone
It seems I've been without you now for so long
I remember the day we got the news
Sitting in the lunch room, I couldn't move
After we all said our goodbyes
I couldn't do anything but cry
I remember thinking that it was all so unfair
The thought of my future without you, I couldn't bear
You didn't get to see me graduate, go to college, or make future plans
Like getting married, having kids, or buying mini-vans
I sometimes ask God to pass on my words
I hope you get them
And just in case you haven't heard
I love you and miss you
I hope you feel the same too
I look forward to seeing you again someday
Until then I'll just patiently wait

The Reaper
Thomas Edge

You,

The Reaper,

Reap what you Sow.

That is how it should Be.

That is how it should Go.

You,

The Reaper,

Decide your Fate:

Corn or Cotton?

Fear or Hate?

Uncultured
Alex Van Meir

I feel so uncultured when I read poetry.
Unable to understand the depth behind
the comparisons to nature or humanity.
Missing the scholarly depth within them
I cringe at my own ignorance.
Yearning for poetry with personal meaning.
A parsimonious poem that could articulate
all of my unspoken feelings.
Allowing me to not feel this loneliness
for just one night.
But here I am once again.
Frustrated beyond belief.
Trying to find meaning in a poem
about a leaf.

Recollection

Elizabeth Clark

When I first wrote this
it was in red ink.

I told myself it mattered
what color I chose.

But when I began to write
red seemed

too harsh.

Because
I stopped hating you
a while ago.

It wasn't even
a true red.

It was
too orange.

Orange was always
your favorite color.

I remember that.

Just like I remember
your birthday
and
how you got
the scar on your lip.

But

I've forgotten
some things.

Like
which lip
your scar is on
or
how big your hands were
compared to mine.

I remember

What your anger felt like
when I asked you questions
you didn't care to understand
and
I always remember
that feeling

when I ask him those questions
and steel myself
for a backlash of jigsaw words.

I remember

What it feels like
to be scared
of your own identity
and
I remember
that
because of you.

But
because of him
maybe
I can forget.

What We Once Were

Anonymous

You were a shriek
that tore through my mind
and sleepless nights
and left universes and thoughts and nebulae
and synapses in tatters.

Burnt out and dying and in ruin.

You were a bleeding and festering wound
stitched together with false promises
and drugs that didn't work.

Reeking of lies and infection and a high
that would never be enough.

You were a mind unraveling and fraying.

Gray matter
crawling with traces
of the last manufactured chemical
that you tried to love.
Saturated with a diagnosis
that you refused to accept.

And me,
charred words
and broken strength.

And me.

You never needed me
as much as you needed
your own insanity.

Lay

Quinton D. Howard

The fortunate & the oppressed, morphed together.
Story of a native & the skin of a settler,
you wouldn't know it by the blue eyes.
Sometimes our eyes lie to us,
Sometimes our instinct compromises our trust.
From love to lust & back to love again,
Through pains, through gains,
the selflessness one must commend.
The Sibling jealousy
that birthed an unconditional affection.
A series of surgeries that evoked a self-resurrection.
An ego, there is none, but the heart is infinite.
A smile of warmth & a value of all pigments.
The sighting of abuse from one's prior,
A teaching that beautiful ignorance cannot tire.

L-A-Y you say,
What does that mean, "Lay?"
One sees "Lay" as a beauty of inconsistency.
As an antonym of simplicity.
As an artist of raw emotion,
As a desperate, who's fear is potent.
"Lay" symbolizes the abstraction we all share
& the fear we all bare.

"Lay" means to put or place in a position of rest.
To rest our fears, shall we first confess?
"Lay" down your fears in the trials of tomorrow.
Let go of your tears in the midst of your sorrow.
"Lay" down your tremor
in the realm of the unknown.
"Lay" down your comfort
& you will see that you are not alone.
As a humanity, I ask that we all "Lay" down
our sin, because Love will, ultimately, always win.

L-A-Y, I say.
I get it now,
"Lay."

The Diagnosis

Alex Van Meir

The results are right there
Right in front of my face
Heckling me with their certainty
Gently she attempts to soothe me
Not wanting to put me within a box
That will constrict and confine the rest of my existence
Knowing already the danger labels have to a person like me
Who tries so desperately to fix the problem
that can never fully heal
But here I am yearning for a label of disease
If nothing more than to finally have a moment of clarity
To give a name to the terror within my mind
The terror that seeks to destroy my existence
every morning, noon, and night
If only but for a moment would I relax into this diagnosis
Right before the nightmare begins
Realizing that in that moment I will never be able
to heal unscathed from this affliction
Cursed to always be just another tortured soul
that will soon be forgotten

Quantum Mechanics

Anonymous

In the quantum world,
Reality is distorted.
Like a blind person groping
In the dark with cobwebs
surrounding my fleeting hands,
I am disorientated.

Electrophilic

Emily Banegas

Your atoms are so exquisite,
With your electrons flying and diving into
The soul of supernovas
That the result is a pigment much like
the pigment of love.
Your atoms are so exquisite,
That the universe fails to understand its love,
And until it does,
It will never expand to its full potential.

Oculus

Anonymous

Eyes
Pierce through my skin.
Gentle as a whisper
Fierce as a cephlapod
Eyes
Define the existence of
Am.
Eyes
Its reason lies within the nest of your
Pupil.
And I'm falling
Your eyes pierce through my skin
My skin is piercing
Mechanoreceptors respond in a lustful tone
Vibrations are keenly aware
of your pierce though my soft skin
Eyes,
pierce through my clothes.
Dopamine is released
You bind to my physiology
as dopamine binds to its protein receptor
Eyes,
you pierce through my soul.

The Madness Inside

Alex Van Meir

The demons plague my mind
Unable to escape their spiteful lullaby
Echoing through my ears so clear
Can you not hear the doubts
screaming within my ear
The ones only appearing
in the middle of the night
Only when I feel truly alone
do they begin to whisper my fate
A release inevitable if this will not dissipate
Fear enveloping freezing the warmth
within my soul
Turning my blood ice cold
Wishing someone could just save me
from my dismay
Realizing this is just a cross I must bear
Praying one day just to find a cure
to this madness I endure

I am...

Amelia Melching

I am, in the eyes of friends and family,
Opinionated
In everything from adding numbers
to cutting cucumbers.
I am educated.
I am a lover of all things political,
While watching Fox News I am critical.
I am however lacking agency, with a loud mind
and quiet voice,
Keeping opinions to myself in large crowds
is my method of choice.
I am a known lover of all animals big and small,
Anything from a cow on a farm
to an armadillo in a ball.
I am competitive on the field
during soccer games,
Maybe even a little hostile, as opposing teams
have made claims.
I am Amelia Melching, a twenty-one year old
filled with uncertainty,
Trying to piece my life together
at William Peace University.

Who Are You?
Brigitte Tondeur

Cherry blossoms white as snow
Drift in the wind like a passing dream
Looking up into the heavens
Searching for who you are

A moss green leaf
All alone in the world
Wanders the path of life
Searching for who you are

A pebble, round and smooth
Floats down the river
Itching to breathe,
To find a voice
Searching,
Looking,
Finding who we are.

Consolation
Taylor Sferrazza

Rest your head upon my shoulder.
Close your eyes, breathe in the warm
Sweet scent of the lonesome times.
Keep quiet, dear–take in the
Meaningless ramblings of the sun.
Know your time will come child,
As mine has; it is gone–
Now while the chill fast approaches,
Marvel at the glistening of the water
And remember the colors of the past.
Come here my child, and rest your head.

Fractured

Elizabeth Clark

She writes because it's easier to scratch
pen on paper
than it is to claw at her own mind.

She pretends
that the words she scrawls are fiction,
because she doesn't want to admit
that she's spilling her own blood
as the ink bleeds onto the page.

She sleeps
in hope of escape
because she's running out of options.
Euphoria is fake.
You can't drown your sorrows
with the burn of whiskey
when you've swam beside them in a
lake of fire.

She pretends that slumber is
a reprieve.
But can she call sleep
an escape
when she drifts off to
the lullabies of her demons,
but wakes to them
screaming her name?

She hears the screaming,
fracturing the void.

She wonders if
it's coming from her,
as her universe
splinters into shards
and she
cuts her hands
trying
to piece it back together.

Discussions

Hunter Edge

So Times went by
And the World got big
And everyone forgot how their Ancestors did
what they did
History gets Modernized
The past is but Dust
But remember one day our world will Rust

Recurrence

Taylor Sferrazza

It's cold and dark
The walls are iridescent in their mimicry and valor
And the floor is stone.
What is left of the dwindling fire
flickers... laughing.
Mockery.
Filling my lungs with whimsy, frigid
unforgiving air I falter and fall.
For what seems like forever,
I stay.
kneeling on the stone.
With the shards of leftover battles that
pierce and tear away at the shadows in my eyes,
the shadows,
thought to be left and forced to be forgotten
and the responsibility is passed on
like disregarded children's toys
sometimes bubbling to the surface,
pleading for attention...
just to be merely avoided.

Snare

Christopher L. Haskins

The worst thing about romance is that
There is never a clear path.
There is always something obstructing others
From finding the true love that they deserve.

But in some cases, it is a thing called race.
In a closer case, it really is that.
The classic tale of a black liking a white.
But what I always question "why?"

This feeling is blissful like a clear summer day.
The thought is sweet as nectar.
The notion is pure as a newborn.
But it can be something beautiful.

It can be an attempt to mend a broken bridge.
One that your people have destroyed
time and time again.
Just like one of your people destroyed
my ancestor's frame of mind
When he forced his way into her shack
and then into her.

Despite the fact that your people never treat
my people right.
Police brutality, frequent lynching, Jim Crow,
Skinheads, the KKK, undeterred terrorism
on US ground,
Politics, Slavery, Segregation,
and who else knows what?

Truth be told, I don't get this.
Why does race still need to be a barrier
for a sweet thing called love?
They shouldn't call this love. They have a name
for this already.
They call this Stockholm Syndrome.

And there'll never be an escape.

I AM

Nyle'sha Arrington

I am an innocent female in a race.
I am in a race to prove myself,
To prove myself in every aspect of my community including:
spiritually, mentally,
emotionally, and academically.
In my life there are so many roles that I hold including:
daughter, sister, student and member of society.
In reality society looks at me as an African American female
or the oppressed target group.
However, there is so much more to me.
I am a daughter of a mother who is counting on me.
A sister of someone who looks up to me.
A student trying to strive to be the best,
regardless of the obstacles I may face.
I am agency.
I have the ability to speak and know that my voice matters.
I am faith.
I am confident on what I believe.

Decompression

Erik Moss

Today was a good day.

For the first time in quite a while, she rolls those five words over in her mind, and actually *feels* them, feels them every bit as strongly as the cold wind hitting her face as she walks out of the performance hall.

Today really *was* a good day, and thank goodness, as she felt she'd been needing one for entirely too long. Bad days were awful and it took the willpower from every fiber of her being to get through them (mostly) intact. Crappy days weren't as bad, but seemingly always left her feeling drained and, more often than not, downright powerless. After those were just... days, days that were dull, flat, colorless, and completely blank in her mind. Of course, they weren't *bad*, per see, and thankfully so, but there was no spice or real, genuine passion or emotion in the events comprising them. Alongside those were decent days where perhaps one or two somewhat beneficial things would unfold for her, or she'd wake up after a lovely dream and manage to carry at least a little of its optimism with her throughout the day's activities. Whatever the case, these decent days often ended up adding some semblance of pleasantness to her life.

Rising majestically above them all were days like these.

Days during which her mind felt stimulated, her soul aroused, and in spite of how it seemed to default to the sort of regulated dormancy of pumping blood to sustain her life (lonely and as she often thought, pointless though it was), her heart suddenly seemed to feel awakened and involved in things, part of it behind every decision she made, no matter how small or insignificant. The environment around her, with brick walls and old statues and entirely too well-kept fields of grass, suddenly seemed to be real and colorful, and she could interpret it all with clarity that her mind rarely ever seemed capable of gathering as of late. Days like these made her feel like she was actually young, and not someone being put through a life that had been laid out and planned for her years in advance by a society that she'd never asked to be a part of, rapidly aging and losing her idealism all the way.

She felt *inspired* on days like these.

For once, she actually takes her time and calmly strolls along the brick pathway (everything seemed to be made of brick at this school, for better or worse) around the campus, much of it bathed in the lovely, luminous glow of the moon above. With the wind in her hair, she meanders past the library, a number of old residential halls, the café (she'd never stopped being appreciative for such a wonderful addition on campus - chai tea was practically her lifeblood nowadays) with its ever-present and absolutely lovely smell, and the main academic hall, before finally arriving at her own dormitory (which, thankfully, was recently-built and not made of brick), towering above much of the other structures around the school, as if built with the intent of looking modern and impressive in order to sharply contrast the slowly-deteriorating buildings within its vicinity. A quick swipe of her pass card allowed her entrance, and after a quick jog up a few flights of stairs which, for once, demanded her appreciation with how new and immaculate they seemed to be, she

was standing in front of the door of her own dormitory, adorned with only a blank whiteboard and a small slip of paper, reading "Aisling Broke."

She thought for a moment before entering to reflect upon what was written on that little nametag. Her name really didn't seem to be such a bad one. Maybe it was her sense of optimism tonight, but she found herself wanting to briefly ponder over it. Broke wasn't the most impressive family name she could've been blessed with, but Aisling wasn't such a bad way to precede it at all. It was Irish and blatantly feminine, not very much unlike herself. She'd read somewhere a long time ago that, apparently, it had something to do with poetry, and therefore, it suited her very well indeed.

She felt the rare gift of a smile cross her lips as she put her key in the doorknob, twisted it, and made her way inside, carefully closing and locking her door behind her. Though her eyes were greeted by the sight of her perpetually messy room, she was untroubled, and with considerable enthusiasm, she took off her heavy, brown coat and tossed it to her bed, covering up a small poster reading "Struggles and Triumphs: Monologues and Memoirs of college seniors, tonight in the Old Cabin Performance Hall." She kicked off her boots with a similar sort of gusto, flipping the switch on her bedside lamp as she did so, illuminating the room with a pleasant orange luminance, which seemed to cast just the right kind of aura about the place. She took a deep breath before letting herself drop down onto her bed, to take in the sight before her.

This room had served as her home for the past seven months now, and while it certainly wasn't perfect, and had been host to no small amount of anxiety, tears, and outright pain, it had also been her sanctuary. It had been the one place on campus where she'd truly felt safe in her solitude, away from the prying eyes of her many classmates, all of which seemed to constantly be investigating her. Within this room, she didn't have to worry about the anxiety which always came to her when she was amongst a crowd. Though no parents or friends (or, curse her never-ending loneliness, boyfriends) ever waited here for her to return after classes to reassure her, to hold her, to make her feel secure, she was at least able to think for herself in this little, single-person dormitory.

In another moment, she hoisted herself up and moseyed over to the mirror beside her closet, taking in the sight of the girl (woman?) known as Aisling Broke. On many, many occasions, she'd taken some time to do this and interpret what stood there in the mirror. Now, tonight, she didn't feel quite so awkward doing so. For once, she didn't think of being too short, of how her shoulders looked too slight or how her hips seemed too wide. Right now, she only thought of how the body in the mirror, messy red hair, wide green eyes, pear figure and all, was the one she'd known all her life. After all it had done for her over the years, maybe it was safe to say it didn't deserve the criticism she so frequently gave it. Her lips slowly parted as she quietly spoke to the image of the person before her,

"Aisling..."

She'd carefully enunciated the name, rolling her tongue over every syllable.

Maybe it wasn't all so bad.

Indeed, today wasn't so, for today was a good day.

After a couple minutes in front of the mirror, she found herself at her desk, her laptop open with her fingers running across it rapidly, a sort of military precision possessing every motion of her hands as poem after poem poured from the very depths of her soul and onto the document on the screen.

Just as a spring was put under compression, weight would be lifted off of it, and it would engage in decompression, its coil relaxing and stretching back to its normal, unperturbed form. Regardless of the type of weight supported, the spring wouldn't simply break, and it always seemed to decompress with ease once the weight on it was lifted, even if only by a short amount.

Untitled

Tayyaba Chaudhry

Life is amazing–often a magical illusion or a nightmare.

My emotions erupt and my feelings boil when I am depressed. The same emotions fly in the air and feelings are uncontrollable when happiness surrounds me. I often question why life proceeds on the way it does. What we don't even have the slightest idea of, happens. What we think of all day long is too far to even measure the distance. Times like this wraps my confusion and leaves it where is most unreachable. My mind often wonders how one person has it all and one doesn't have anything. And the ones left in the middle are either too happy or too sad to focus on reality of life itself. It is often confusing how life works. One craves attention and gets it. The other craves food and only gets hungered to a worse level. How can life bear to see one happy and the other sad? Is fame more important than food? They say good things take time. Time passes by every day, hour and second. When does the right time come? And why does it take so long for those that suffer the most? When happiness is upon us, life passes by in the blink of an eye, and when one is suffering, the same time takes ages for a single day to pass by. Why is time often a tempting torture when it doesn't do anything but go on? How does time reveal our future and destiny when it only goes on and on? The one thing that doesn't stop for us is the same thing that has everyone occupied on running after it - time. The play of life is quite intense. One day you bond in friendships and the next day that bond becomes a circle of enemies. The same tongue one day is used to express kindness is used the next day to fire out words of hate. The same heart loves one thing one day and the next day it beats for another. When does time itself decide it's the right time? How can time determine big decisions of life when it hasn't experienced the pain of "stop" and "pause"? I am in extreme wonder of how time can play such a huge game with everyone. Every single human is based on and running after time - time that doesn't do anything for anyone in return.

Flowers and Church

Starlina Rose

Iris had been to church one time in her life. It was at a rehab for men in rural North Georgia, where her stepfather had gone to get better. She was eleven. It was a day trip. She and her mother had driven down on five dollars of gas (it was back when five dollars in gas in a ramshackle red and white Ford would last you one hundred miles).

The chapel was small and crowded. There were about four or five short pews on each side of the aisle, and the aisle was crooked because it led to a squat cast-iron stove instead of the pulpit or lectern, which was in front of Iris's row of pews. Iris was squeezed into the third pew with other children. Her mother and stepfather sat in front of her.

Looking back, Iris realized the service was evangelical. The young preacher wore rimless glasses, which she remembered because he referenced his eyes many times as paced in front of the lectern, from the black stove to the screen door and back again.

Her mother had gone to a Baptist church every Sunday when she was growing up, and she'd often told Iris of the ladies who would pass the children candy during the service. Sure enough, the fat lady wearing a tightly strained string of pearls behind her, whose three daughters Iris was sitting next to, tried to pass her some candy canes and Twinkies over her shoulder.

Iris wasn't allowed to eat sugar, so she leaned back over the pew and whispered, "No, no, thank you. I don't eat sugar." The lady's smile faltered and she gave the candy to her daughters.

If we repented, God would forgive our sins and we would get to go to heaven, where all our physical ailments - like the preacher's bad eyesight, would be healed. That was the gist of the sermon, the rest of which Iris spent half-embarrassed over the candy episode, half feeling superior because she was sitting in the third row and those in the first row were getting showered with the preacher's spittle.

All through the Appalachian Mountains, in the parkland, you can find tiny, abandoned villages. This is how the rehab was spread out in the North Georgian wilderness. Another comparison would be a summer camp, but for adults with criminal addictions. The mess hall was the highest building; square and white, it straddled the ridge. Down one side, swooping to the edge of the pine brake was a large garden, which was fertilized with the sewage from the camp—which was all Iris could smell.

Down the other side of the ridge was the chapel, a few outbuildings and a tiny, organic garden which Iris never got the chance to go into.

The ridge flattened out into scrub, blackberry brambles, and a few pine trees, beyond which was a wide ribbon of meadow under power lines that stretched from hill to horizon.

Iris was alone for most of the afternoon after the service. Her mother and step-father were around sporadically, sometimes in the mess hall, sometimes talking to other people in one of the outbuildings. Sometimes they vanished altogether for hours. There was a big boysenberry bush on

the ridge, far away from the sewer smell. It was the fever pitch of summer and the berries drooped from the limbs, fully ripe, a big as strawberries and as black as fresh tar. At one point, her mother misheard Iris's step-father and thought he said "poison berry." Or perhaps he misheard someone else and told Iris's mother what he thought he heard. Iris told her they were boysenberries, but she didn't believe Iris and told her to go play elsewhere before disappearing again. Iris went back to the bush and put a dent in the supply.

What Iris did next gives her shivers as an adult. Rattlesnakes and copperheads roam the woodlands and meadows of North Georgia, and a child, small in stature as Iris was then, is more likely to die from a bite than an adult is. The late afternoon air was speckled with shadows from the towering pine trees and flavored by the scent of the pine needles that broke under her feet, of ripe blackberries, and the odor of the sun-steeped grass and wildflowers in the meadow. Iris flitted, in her white jeans and tennis shoes, in and out of the woods, playing in the clearings, and then she wandered into the meadow.

Iris didn't find a horrible death by rattlesnake or copperhead.

Iris didn't get caught and shredded by the vicious wild brambles.

Iris found the most beautiful, exotic flower she'd ever seen. It was a purple, passionflower and its scent was the kernel of the honey in the air that flowed around her.

Iris would have loved to say it stayed and lived in the filtered sun, under the sheltering overhang of branches at the edge of the wood, but it didn't. When she took the stem in her right hand and bent to smell the flower, the ripe head fell off. It landed decapitated but unharmed on the leaves and she picked it up and took it back to the truck.

There was no water in the truck and no stem on the flower head to stick in water if she had it, so she laid it on the dusty red dashboard and hoped her mother appeared before it wilted so she could see it in its purple glory.

Gloaming was creeping by the time Iris made back up to the mess hall. Her mother and stepfather were nowhere in sight. The sewage smell had dissipated from the garden down the hill, so Iris slipped down the embankment (which was steeper than she thought - the edge of her shoe ripped grass clods from the side of the hill) and found herself in the lettuce patch. Evening air had cleared the scent of sewage, but she was still careful to walk just along the edge. But.

Just inside the rows of tomatoes, strange, tall, globular flowers bent and swayed. In the dimming light, she couldn't see them clearly, so she waded between the heaped tomato vines. Iris had almost reached the flowers when she heard her mother calling her, "Iris! Iris!" She turned and rushed out of the garden, and as she did, a ripe tomato burst against her thigh. Neither warm nor cold, the stain as she scrabbled up the hill looked like she had been shot in the leg.

Her mother didn't notice the stain. She waited in front of the mess hall, hands on hips, and told Iris to stay right there, "We're leaving soon."

After thirty or so minutes, with darkness becoming complete outside the reach of the dim light from the sparse lampposts, Iris wandered.

There was a rock and shrub construction between the chapel and mess hall. In the dark, she didn't know if it was a maze or a garden. There was a solitary black lamppost in the center of it. She had wrapped her hand around the cool, ribbed metal and was loosely, slowly swinging round and round it, watching the moths above her when a man she had seen earlier working in the organic garden appeared at the edge of the construction, beyond a shrub.

He had short, spiky salt and pepper hair, was about forty-five or so, and not bad looking. He clasped something his hands, fingers braided so she could not see it.

He entreated her to come closer, but she shook her head. He said he would not harm her, but Iris knew about child molesters, and shook her head again. He kept coaxing. She wondered to herself what he was at the rehab for. He kept on until she let go of the lamppost and went, keeping the shrub between them.

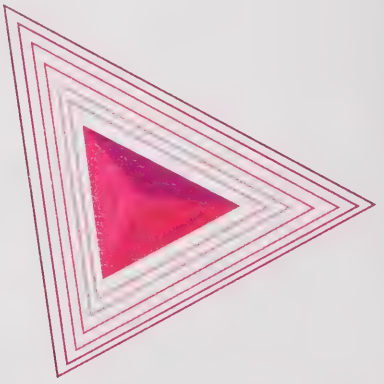
When she was near enough, he parted his hands and thrust what he held toward her. It was a small toad. Iris shrieked and jumped back. He laughed and let the toad go under the shrub. She grabbed hold of the lamppost again. "Don't talk to strange men," he said. After commenting on the beauty of the night and the stars, and a long pause in which he just looked at Iris, he walked away. She looked down at the paths around her, wanting to see the frog.

Her mother came out of the mess hall with her stepfather in tow. They kissed goodbye and he walked them down to the Ford.

The purple flower was wilted when they got in, but the smell–It had perfumed the cab of the truck divinely. Her mother didn't get to see it at its prettiest, but she did get to smell it the entire ride back.

The church service has come to Iris's mind over the years, making her irreligiously long to go to a service in a cathedral just to see if she could feel god. In cathedrals, the pews are longer, and she still doesn't eat sugar, but she's safe now because she's an adult. The pulpit is not a fake wooden lectern. It is also a safe distance from the first row.

Her stepfather sent home with them a large blue Igloo cooler of summer squash, zucchini, and cantaloupes. After they got home, it sat in the ribbed, red bed of the Ford for a couple of days before they lugged it out and tossed the vegetables. Her mother scrubbed the cooler out with rubbing alcohol and put it in the garage.



Time

James Embree

Somehow this white-walled room looked different this time. The fluorescent was brighter and cracked louder, and the stainless-steel table my palms rested on was smoother. It felt like the most inviting surface for miles. I could lean back further in the chair I was in. Smaller sounds, like the coffee machine whirring and the analog clock's ticking were louder than ever. The ceiling fan above me was at the height of its duration, bringing down loud gusts of wind, giving a sense of ease. The room was much bigger than the last time I was in it. I didn't know if realizing this intimidated me or comforted me. All I'd wanted to do was leave but now I realize that after the first step out I won't know what comes next. For year after year people would fantasize and swap stories about being elsewhere, but at no point in any of those ideas is there any sitting at this table pondering nothing more than the next several hours.

The guard walked in and dropped my clothes in front of me. I stood up and began to strip the jumpsuit and put them on. The feel of my unwashed and torn "Lynyrd Skynyrd," brought a sense of relief that I didn't think would ever be possible of it. The jeans were a little bigger now and my boots slid on effortlessly. I felt home already.

The guard returned all of my things after I was dressed. A wallet with $40, which I'll likely need for a meal on the way home, a pack of cigarettes with two left that I'd been dreaming about since my first week here concluded, with no lighter of course, and about a pocketful of change. An ongoing argument I always had every night was the amount I had had when I came in. I counted it and my guess wasn't even close, but I still had enough to make whatever calls I needed. The guard opened the front door and I stepped out into a world that some of my friends can only dream about.

The sun hit me hard as I was let out, as if I should've been prepared for it after all this time. I smiled when I thought about just how long it'd be before I was daydreaming about going back in, just to get back to the comfort of the AC and the fan I was just under. Very little had changed, as four years is not nearly enough to civilize a treeless vast of space with only a couple visible roads, so close to a prison no less. The town that sent me here was just a speck on the horizon, but was clearly on the forthcoming path and was clearly the town I'd lived several years in.

The lone pay phone right outside the gate had little mystery as to why it was there. I picked up the receiver, put a couple quarters in, and called my home instinctively, having no trouble recalling the number. With every ring a small fear grew in my stomach, as I hadn't considered nobody picking up, and would then be lost before even really beginning if my call were to be ignored. But someone eventually picked up.

"Hello?" the familiar voice rang in my ear. I savored it as I didn't know how long it'd maintain its tone.

"Holly," I began, "I know it's been awhile." I took a long pause. "You know I got out today?" I figured I'd try to not to berate her for not remembering.

Another few seconds ticked by, "Oh. Lou, sorry–

You're right it's been awhile." She sounded surprised but not very interested.

"You wanna come pick me up?" I threw out. "I'd feel better talking to you in person." I wanted to sound as I honest as I'd been wanting to be when I foresaw this phone-call, starting when we hadn't spoken nor seen each other for about six months.

"I would and I mean that," she began carefully, "but I had to sell the car last year."

I'd thought maybe she'd be gone, or at least been away for the call. Up until this day I'd considered the best and the worst outcomes of this call, but none of them involved this conversation, nor selling the car, and walking home all those miles even less.

"I can call a cab," I finally responded, reading the ads on the pay phone. "Then we can talk when I get there. Alright?"

"Yeah, I guess you should," she mumbled, as if she wouldn't mind if I forgot to show up or forgot we knew each other at all.

After another foreboding pause I hung up the phone with growing anxieties and dialed the taxi service listed on the pay phone with the rest of my change. The man on the other end sounded discouraged from picking up someone here, but was more submissive when I offered thirty-five of the $40 for the whole trip.

After a few minutes passed, a yellow car pulled up with the name of the cab company. I nodded at the heavy-set old man in the front seat, who was unresponsive, and I got in the back. Without a word between us he turned around and started back, as if I'd already told him where I wanted to be dropped off.

I mostly stared out the window, reestablishing my familiarity with a newfound appreciation for all the open space. There were several miles that consisted of nothing but hard desert ground, and I still found reason to smile at it. Each time my eyes would migrate to the front I'd catch the old man giving me a spiteful glare.

"You having a good day?" I asked, feeling foolish.

"It's been alright." His words sounded forced. Thankfully the road was mostly straight so he could keep giving me suspicious glances as long as he pleased.

"Alright. You can let me out at Redmond Park. It's not too far into town."

He muttered something I couldn't quite make out, but it sounded like something along the lines of "figures." Then he'd keep his eyes on the road for the rest of the duration.

I could feel myself sinking as I saw the sign for Redmond Park get closer and closer. I knew how much disdain was coming in my direction, but it's not like I hadn't had time to decide to face it, as well as to prepare for it. The sign had become even more worn and old with deterioration and graffiti, and looked like a bad cliché. I feared this would be a warning of what came next, but I knew better and ignored the idea.

I thanked the man quietly and reached for the handle. I heard the locks go down abruptly.

"Pay before you get out," he said to me.

I sighed, not even ninety minutes out, and exhausted already. I complied and took out my wallet and paid the old man, who snatched the money right out of my fingers. He then unlocked the doors and did everything but go to the back door and kick me out himself.

Every turn I took on my way through the neighborhood resonated the insignificant details of all the times I'd made this exact same walk. I would remember the set-up of every trailer, as well as the names of all the people giving me bewildered looks as I went by them without a word. I could remember things I'd never bothered to notice, like the chips of paint missing from a few of the homes, I knew they'd been there for a good long while, but each of these images would come back only the second before I was around each corner. In a way it was uplifting, like being there for the first time, but I knew better than that as well.

I felt differently about my own home. I'd spent so much time there careless and disoriented, but also so much time isolating myself there. I was too familiar at this point to notice any small differences. I spent a couple seconds just standing there as if I'd forgotten how to knock on a screen door, then did so. I heard the creak of someone getting off the couch.

Holly came and opened the door, mumbling a greeting of sorts. I'd planned on eating with her, and hopefully making some sort of case or agreement with her, but all that would actually be done would be small monosyllabic exchanges, hers radiating apathy. Her blonde hair had gotten longer, and she was hardly dressed, though I knew she worked on Tuesdays. I'd checked the calendar on my way out but figured she'd take the day to come get me. The diverse smell of the trailer was nostalgic of all the habits we'd had in preceding years, some of them relevant to my absence. The fact that she hadn't gone away herself is rather surprising, as I often helped prevent that. Her appearance was that of an unemployed and troubled woman, as a woman of actually 43 but wore the age of someone pushing 60.

Holly sprawled back on the couch and I pulled up a chair across from it. I stared at her expecting a conversation to happen, while she looked around aimlessly, eventually opting to occupy her eyes and hands with a new cigarette. I gave up on waiting.

"It's been over three years. You have nothing to say?" I was agitated, but tried not to show it. I tried to refrain from yelling.

"What do you want me to say?" she began. "You expected to still be a part of our lives from there? We still needed the money you were making. We couldn't waste gas to visit you."

I wasn't mad when I first called her, and I still didn't want to be. "I just want to know what I've missed." I told her after another stint of silence.

Her eyes were still evasive. "Well, the car's gone, obviously. I got let off shortly before that. We

managed to hang onto our home, some months more difficult than others," there was clear resentment on her face as she stared at the digital clock on the table near me to pretend I wasn't there. Then she finally continued "The kids got jobs, for a while at least. Randal still has his."

"What about Liz?" I asked hastily.

"Liz," Holly paused, conjuring a cold and uncaring stone expression, now with eyes actually fixed on me. "Liz got herself pregnant. Shortly after her seventeenth. Ran off with the dad, some kid she went out with twice at school. Never met him, and I still haven't seen her."

I knew that Elizabeth had scarcely respected either of us, and I knew of her rash impulsivity, and she certainly condemned our habits and routines to justify her behavior, though none of us would ever say it. It had started around age twelve, not too long before I went away, and I'd thought of it over and over again in that time. But none of that could stop me from feeling so distraught when I got this news. I was now the one looking away from an unwavering stare, a stare that told me what to think and who was to blame.

"Well that's terrible," were the only three words that could come from me at that time. I still shouldn't be able to talk, and that'd be the case, if I were actually more surprised. I had to move on and say something else. "Where's Randal working?" I looked back at her.

Holly looked away again, and stared at the wall, a little anger still in her expression. The cigarette was hardly used and burning away between her fingers. "Got a warehouse job. Wade gave him one."

I hadn't thought about my neighbor Wade in a long time. To me he'd just been a name that people talked about and the guy I'd gotten into a drunken fight with once, with no later recollection as to what it was over. That next morning I was groggy and irritable and hung over to the point where I didn't care to look into that, and never really grew any desire to. We were complete strangers from then on out.

We looked at each other again. Holly looked as if she were waiting for me to stand up and solve everything, even though she never told me about any of this, with no regard to what I endured the past four years, as if I'd taken an extended vacation or simply ditched her. I could ultimately see in her that whatever relationship or whatever understanding we had at some point had now gone away entirely.

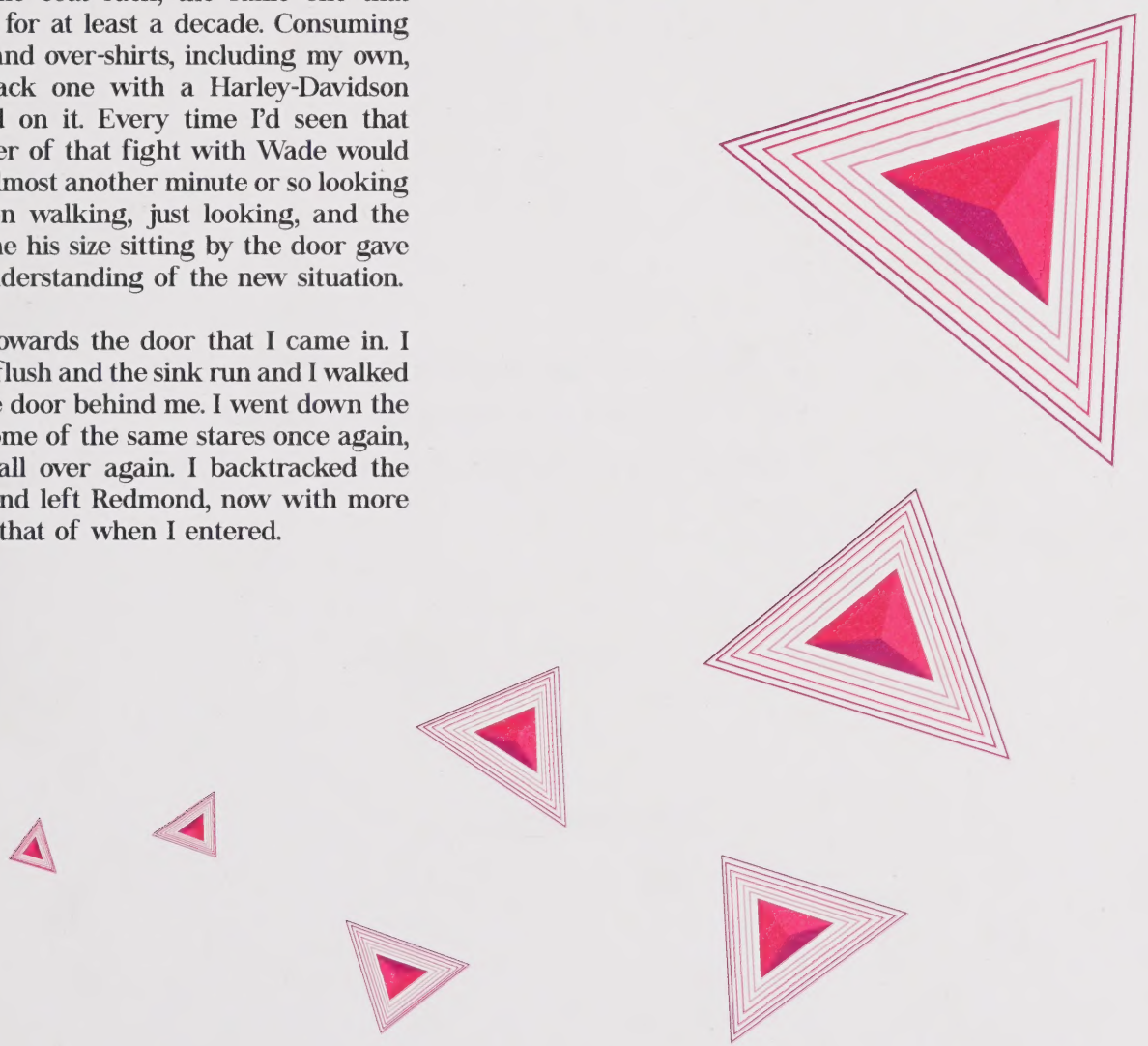
"I have to go to the bathroom," she said. I remained mute as she stood up stoically, as if she had the right to be, and went down the carpeted hall to the restroom.

Focusing became harder as my frustrations progressed. I wondered, how did I ever live here? I wondered as I noticed the insufferable condition of the sitting area and the kitchen, torn apart furniture and completely wrecked stoves, this world I was returning to seemed beyond repair. This was nothing in comparison to the size of the trailer. I thought, how could I ever live so compressed? Everything they did over time and all they had and all they cared for could be found

within thirty feet.

Then another thing caught my eye. I got up and walk towards the coat rack, the same one that had been there for at least a decade. Consuming all our jackets and over-shirts, including my own, was a large black one with a Harley-Davidson insignia marked on it. Every time I'd seen that symbol the anger of that fight with Wade would return. I spent almost another minute or so looking around, not even walking, just looking, and the boots of someone his size sitting by the door gave way a better understanding of the new situation.

I looked back towards the door that I came in. I heard the toilet flush and the sink run and I walked out, shutting the door behind me. I went down the road and saw some of the same stares once again, ignoring them all over again. I backtracked the usual route in and left Redmond, now with more resolution than that of when I entered.



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